

Jason Hannan, "Review of *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture* by Dana Cloud (Ohio State University Press)," *Lateral* 7.2 (2018).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L7.2.16>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 7.2 (Fall 2018)

Review of *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture* by Dana Cloud (Ohio State University Press)

Jason Hannan

ABSTRACT Dana Cloud's marvelous new book provides just the sort of deep understanding and practical guidance needed for thoughtful and effective political engagement in the Trump era. In three fascinating case studies, Cloud demonstrates the impotence of naked facts and the power of mediation. First, she compares the cases of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, both of whom leaked classified information in acts of patriotic resistance. Second, in a chapter on the 2014 television series *Cosmos*, Cloud seeks to explain the show's enormous rhetorical power. Third, Cloud compares the revolutionary rhetoric of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* to that of the Black Lives Matter and Occupy movements. As we live through the devastation wrought by a Trump presidency, as we seek to make sense of it all in our scholarship and our classrooms, as we resist his attempt to reengineer of reality and search for ways to reassert our own reality, the reality of the people, *Reality Bites* comes not a moment too soon.

Cloud, Dana. *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2018. Pp. 206. (paper). ISBN 978-0-8142-5465-3. US list \$29.95.

The election of Donald Trump to the office of the President of the United States still leaves us, more than a year and half later, groping in the dark for answers to questions such as: How is it that a pathological liar, a man with absolutely no respect for truth, logic, and evidence, could march straight into the White House? Here was a cartoon-like personality out of the eighties, notorious for his numerous bankruptcies and a hilariously bad comb over. His candidacy was thought to be so incredibly silly, his prospects for electoral victory so cosmically improbable, that comedian Jon Oliver actively encouraged him to run—all for the sake of a good laugh. But that laughter turned into raw, blood-curdling fear as Trump first won the Republican primaries and then proceeded to defeat Hillary Clinton in the general election. Hillary had widely been seen as the natural victor. But it turned out that Trump played a political game for which Hillary was completely unprepared. Against her dry, humorless, and uninspiring political style, he fashioned an egregious performance of mendacity, incivility, tastelessness, trashiness, and irreverence. This performance had an underlying message: the old days of politics as usual are over. It is time to shake things up. To almost everyone's surprise, this rhetorical strategy worked.

As we now live through the nightmare of Trump's victory—the unprecedented transfer of wealth from the poor and the middle class to the ultra-rich, tax breaks to mega-corporations, the shredding of civil liberties, horrifying violence against immigrants and people of color, and an aggressive assault upon the environment—we struggle to answer two questions: how to make sense of it all and how to respond. To that end, Dana Cloud's marvelous new book, *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S.*

Political Culture, provides just the sort of deep understanding and practical guidance needed for thoughtful and effective political engagement in the Trump era.

Cloud deftly carves out a theoretical standpoint between the twin extremes of foundationalism and relativism, the former a lingering relic of early analytic philosophy, the latter still very much a fashionable, if not always explicit, position within the humanities. She identifies her standpoint with the “reality-based community” (3). Challenging the anti-realism of poststructuralist thought, she embraces a critical realism rooted in the concepts of reality and truth. Cloud defines reality as the natural and social world around us. She defines truth as the positive relationship between a particular claim and reality. But truth for Cloud is not, or not just, another version of the correspondence theory. Rather, it is very much a practical concept. She locates truth in the everyday experience of ordinary people. In doing so, she follows in the tradition of Marx, Lukács, Gramsci, and Bourdieu, who see in the dialectic of practical experience the source of truth and normativity.

As a seasoned rhetorical theorist and critic, Cloud articulates her practical conception of truth by undoing Aristotle’s hierarchy of *episteme* (formal knowledge and understanding) over *doxa* (popular opinion). She equalizes the relationship between them, arguing that the one can become the other, and vice versa. While there is a clear populist dimension to this approach, it nonetheless differs from the political philosophy of Ernesto Laclau in *Populist Reason* and Chantal Mouffe in *For a Left Populism*. Neither Laclau nor Mouffe have any use for truth, choosing to locate political legitimacy exclusively in populist will. Their populism is more akin to tribalism than to a rational democratic politics. The merit of Cloud’s approach is her prudent avoidance of the neo-tribalist temptation. To fight back against Trump, it will take more than a mere rival populism. His mendacity must be fought with populism plus truth.

The secret to the stunning political success of Trump and American right is their virtual monopoly upon “strategies of mediation” (9). While Democratic politicians undoubtedly have a better command of the facts, they place far too much faith in the power of facts alone. Mainstream newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and media projects like PolitiFact, have followed this pattern by fact-checking Trump and documenting his innumerable lies. This naïve faith in naked facts, in self-evident truths, has proven to be weak and futile in the face of a remarkably powerful right-wing political machine that has managed to take command of the national conversation by expertly, albeit manipulatively, employing the rhetorical strategies of affect, embodiment, narrative, myth, and spectacle. If liberals and progressives wish to mount an effective counter-campaign against this manipulative assault, then they would do well to understand the rhetorical character of facts and the importance of framing facts through strategies of mediation.

In three fascinating case studies, Cloud demonstrates the impotence of naked facts and the power of mediation. First, she compares the cases of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, both of whom leaked classified information in acts of patriotic resistance. Despite both committing the same crime, the media framing of their actions was completely different. Snowden’s leak was mediated through the journalism of Glenn Greenwald, who helped construct a clear and memorable narrative about government surveillance. Snowden became a popular hero, a character straight out of an American thriller novel. Manning, however, became the object of TMZ-style gossip. She released a mountain of classified information through WikiLeaks, an “information dump” (76) without framing or mediation. The consequence was that the public focused on the messenger, and her gender identity and sexual orientation, not the message. Second, in a chapter on the 2014 television series *Cosmos*, Cloud seeks to explain the show’s

enormous rhetorical power. *Cosmos* masterfully mediated its progressive content (science is actually considered progressive in America) through myth, narrative, affect, embodiment, and spectacle. To watch *Cosmos* is not just to acquire a list of facts about the natural world. It is to become engrossed in a powerful story about humanity's modest place in a vast and complex universe. Third, Cloud compares the revolutionary rhetoric of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* to that of the Black Lives Matter and Occupy movements. Despite very different propositional content, Paine, BLM, and Occupy nonetheless share something crucial in common: they all seized upon revolutionary moment and employed the strategies of affect, identification, embodiment, narrative, myth, and spectacle to assert the "insurrectionary knowledges" (12) of ordinary people against the dominant framing of social reality. Paine, BLM, and Occupy represent powerful examples of the truth from below, the voice of the people speaking truth to power. During these revolutionary moments, when the reality of the dominant class bites, "our reality bites back" (168).

Reality Bites is a lucid, sophisticated, and passionate book. The argument is sharp and convincing. The research is thorough and rigorous. *Reality Bites* admirably speaks to multiple audiences—scholars, students, journalists, and activists. As we live through the devastation wrought by a Trump presidency, as we seek to make sense of it all in our scholarship and our classrooms, as we resist his attempt to reengineer reality and search for ways to reassert our own reality, the reality of the people, *Reality Bites* comes not a moment too soon. It is therefore a highly recommended book.

 [Bio](#)

Jason Hannan

Jason Hannan is Associate Professor in the Department of Rhetoric & Communications at the University of Winnipeg. He is the editor of *Truth in the Public Sphere* (2016) and *Philosophical Profiles in the Theory of Communication* (2012). His current book project is entitled, *Critique of Capitalist Reason: MacIntyre, Communication, and the Politics of Revolution*, under contract with Bloomsbury.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.
ISSN 2469-4053